

## Love Bytes

Beverley hated the office, not her job, not even the people she worked with, even though they were always so beastly to her; it was the atmosphere, it was always so oppressive. Nobody else seemed to notice, but that was because they belonged there, and she didn't. It wasn't that she was unattractive, certainly Harry didn't think so; Harry the Hands they called him, for obvious reasons. Tom had told her he fancied her once, too. Tom was married, but that didn't matter; he'd said it, that was what mattered. So she was definitely not unattractive, it was just her stutter and her withered arm that discouraged most people, not just men, but women with whom she'd have gladly been friends.

Life was so unfair, she thought. There was a blind girl who lived on the floor above her. She was so much more disadvantaged than Beverley, and less attractive, and overweight too. Yet she had lots of friends, and she'd just got engaged. Beverley was twenty-four, two years older than the blind girl, but in spite of that she'd never even had a boyfriend, not really. Her mother had told her she'd end up an old maid if she didn't make an effort soon. Beverley had tried to explain to her that it wasn't her fault. She used to go out once, sometimes twice a week, always by herself. She'd visit a bar or a club, or maybe somewhere *avant garde* like a discoteque. She'd even been to an old-fashioned acid house party once; whenever and wherever she went, she always went alone, and she always came home alone. That was what really hurt, nobody ever asked Beverley to dance, nobody even gave her the come-on, except a man at the office who had hands like an octopus. She thought of Harry again, he wasn't so bad, perhaps, but he wasn't interested in her. Sure, he'd chat her up once in a while, and once he'd even rubbed up against her in the lift, but he never gave her a second thought when Margaret or any of the others were around.

Beverley sighed audibly as she climbed into the lift on the ground floor. It was packed, as usual. She reached out to press the button for the 64<sup>th</sup> floor, but a long, slender hand beat her to it. She looked at the hand, then at the arm that followed it, all the way up to the owner's face. It belonged to Linda from accounts. Beverley smiled at the tall girl, but Linda turned away and smiled instead at the man standing next to her. Beverley opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. She'd only make a fool of herself again. Last time she'd spoken to Linda, the tall girl had snubbed her. It wasn't hate or even dislike, just contempt.

Several people got out at the 64<sup>th</sup>; Beverley followed Linda down the corridor and into the main office. The office was open plan except for several cubicles on the north and west sides. Beverley worked in one of these most of the time, with Cytron, the audio-activated computer. She really liked working with Cytron; it was the ultimate in state-of-the-art technology; it did everything except make the tea. It still had a keyboard ([Maltron](#) rather than Qwerty), but she seldom used this, and the next model, the Mk III which was due out some time next year, would consist of nothing more than a screen and a printer; everything else would be totally self-contained.

Beverley went straight to her cubicle and sat down in front of the screen. A thick pile of papers filled the in-tray, and a note on top from Mr Stimson, the department head, demanded: "Miss Coates, I need these finished by three o'clock."

Beverley sighed, not "please," just get them done by 3pm. It was the little things like that which hurt her most. She didn't mind the odd barb or sly pun so much, and she'd grown inured to the stutter mockers. ("Hello Bevevery, h-how are y-you today?"). But they always treated her differently from everyone else, even when they weren't being deliberately unkind; it was just thoughtlessness, and even the boss was the same, though to be scrupulously fair, Mr Stimson was not the most pleasant man she'd ever met; he'd been known to bark at everyone from time to time.

Beverley gritted her teeth and waded into the pile of correspondence, so that by mid-morning she was two thirds of the way through it. She thought she'd better slow down for a bit because if she were to finish it by twelve, Mr Stimson would give her another pile to do this afternoon, and though she was an industrious type she didn't see the point of making more work for herself. She decided to play a game with Cytron.

"Switch off correspondence function, please Cytron," she commanded.

"Switching off," the machine replied obediently. She liked Cytron's voice, though it was mechanical it was deep and not totally unlike the voice of HAL 9000, the renegade computer she'd seen a couple of years ago in that old film, what was it called? *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

She'd enjoyed that; the vision of 2001 portrayed in that was far removed from the reality of mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century suburbia. True, the joint American-Soviet expedition had sent several men to Mars, but there were no permanent space stations, and no bases on the Moon. In fact, most people seldom travelled at all except to go to work, and for their annual six weeks allocations of leave, and that was more ritual than enjoyment, certainly it was for Beverley.

"Poor, poor Beverley. Little lost Beverley", she said, mimicking her mother. "No friends for my little chick." She sighed again.

"Game function, please Cytron".

"Switching to game function," the machine responded.

She always called it by its name, and she always said please whenever she commanded it to do something. Nobody else in the office did, probably nobody else in the world did. It was only a machine, after all. That was true enough, but to Beverley, Cytron was almost a friend. She knew some people programmed their computers to answer them by name; she had been tempted to so programme Cytron, but was afraid if she did, people would laugh at her.

**“Ping, pong please,” said Beverley to the machine.**

**“Does not compute,” replied Cytron in its mechanical voice.**

**“Sorry, table tennis”.**

**The machine switched to a simulated table tennis game, and Beverley pressed the one player button. She’d have to keep a look out; the games function had been built into these machines specifically for employees’ amusement, but they weren’t supposed to use them on company time. Beverley played for ten minutes, but then her finger started to ache.**

**“Correspondence function please Cytron,” she said.**

**“Switching to correspondence function,” the machine obeyed.**

**That was fortunate, because just as it did so, Mr Stimson entered the cubicle, as usual without knocking.**

**“Have you finished the Cobalt correspondence yet, Miss Coates?”**

**“Oh yes,” she said, looking round. Beverley fumbled through the papers in the out-tray with her good hand, but Mr Stimson was in an even more unpleasant mood than usual.**

**“Leave it, girl, I’ll get it”.**

**He searched through the papers and held up three letters, “Hmm, you’ve completed all three”.**

**“Yes, Mr Stimson.”**

**He looked down at her suspiciously, “You’re a lot more efficient than you look, young woman”. It was intended as a compliment, but Mr Stimson was the kind of man who could make even a compliment sound like an insult.**

**Beverley smiled weakly, and to her surprise he responded.**

**“Come and see me later, I’ve got couple of line searches for you to do”.**

**“Yes, Mr Stimson”.**

**As he left the cubicle, his smile became a snarl, and he went off in search of some less efficient person. Beverley remembered Brenda saying Mr Stimson was the only man she’d ever met who was only ever really happy when he was miserable. He’d only been in charge of the office for three months, but in that short period he’d managed to make himself universally unpopular. Beverley felt a bit sorry for him; he wasn’t bad looking really, in a rugged sort of way, and he was obviously very unhappy.**

**Later that day, Mr Stimson gave her a line search to work on. He’d said he’d want a lot more done over the coming months; it was a special order for an ongoing market research project, and, he added, as she was easily the most efficient worker under his command (the best of a bad bunch were his actual words), he was entrusting her with the lion’s share. Did she feel up to it?**

**“Of course,” replied Beverley, “I’ve got a higher degree in information recovery”.**

**"Have you?" asked Mr Stimson, glancing down at her CV, one of many which at this moment was strewn across his desk.**

**“Why so you have,” his eyes lit up, “you’re really a very intelligent young woman, Miss Coates.”**

**“Thank you, Mr Stimson,” she said, blushing and smiling.**

**Turning back to his desk he finished off his compliment with his usual blunting remark, “You’re so unlike Miss Berwick and Miss Taylor; brains and beauty never go together.”**

**“Thank you, Mr Stimson,” Beverley left his office with a file under her good arm and a lump in her throat. Later that afternoon, there was a knock on her cubicle door and a tall, curly haired man entered.**

**“Hi,” he said.**

Beverley turned her swing chair towards the door and looked up into the face of Luke Cousins. When she saw who it was, she felt her heart flutter; she really fancied Luke, and he knew it. What did he want? She hoped he hadn't come to tease her again, but it soon became apparent that he had.

"Oh, hello Luke," she said, trying desperately to control the wobble in her voice. He stood watching and said, "Hey Beverley, what are you doing after work?"

Did that mean he was going to ask her out?

"Tonight? I don't know Luke, why?"

"Oh, I just thought..." he left the sentence hanging.

"Yes," said Beverley.

"Well, I thought..."

"Yes, L-Luke, what d-did you th-think?"

Whenever Beverley became emotional, her stutter returned. Recently she'd been able to keep it under control using the new Perkin's Technique, a sort of self-hypnosis. She'd never believed in anything like that before, but it seemed to work, though as soon as her blood pressure rose, or her pulse increased, or even if she got butterflies in her stomach, she lost all control. Unfortunately, this was what happened now, and what Luke had intended to happen. He chatted her up, flattered her, smooth talked her until she could hardly think straight, then he said, "Anyway, about tonight".

"Y-y-y-yes L-L-Luke".

"Well, maybe it's not such a good idea".

"W-w-what L-L-Luke?"

"Well, some other time maybe"

Her heart sank, "Wh-when?"

"Oh, I dunno, Beverley. Tomorrow maybe".

**“To-tomorrow?” she said, her hopes rising again.**

**“Or next week”.**

**“N-next w-week?”**

**He looked at his watch then said, “Hey I gotta go, see you later, huh”.**

**Beverley smiled weakly. She knew he’d just been stringing her along; it was a cruel game he liked to play sometimes, not just with her. She’d seen him wind up other girls at times, but just how cruel it was, she soon found out. The manager’s buzzer sounded on her control panel, and Mr Stimson’s voice said: “Miss Coates, bring me file 4 stroke XY at once”.**

**“I h-haven’t finished it y-yet, Mr Stimson”.**

**“I said bring it to me girl, at once!”**

**“Yes sir,” she said.**

**She delivered the file to Mr Stimson, who was engaged in a furious argument with a subordinate on the inter-office monitor. Then she went back to her cubicle, but for some reason she walked the long way round. As she approached the cubicle on the adjacent wall, a roar of male voices sounded from inside. Then a female voice spoke, it was loud and tinny. Beverley recognised the voice immediately, because it was her own. She stood outside the door and listened as Luke rewound the micro-cassette and played it back from the beginning. Another male voice sounded, “Hey, I’ll bet Beverley’s a right little r-raver!” Laughter.**

**“Hey L-Luke, g-g-gimme a kiss.” More laughter.**

**Beverley turned around and walked back to her cubicle the other way. By the time she reached it, her eyes were full of tears. She sat down at the computer and, with the door closed, and locked away from the world, she sobbed her heart out.**

**After about five minutes, she sat up, wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and said “It’s not fair, Cytron, nobody likes me”.**

**“I like you, Beverley,” replied the computer.**

**Beverley was startled, not only was the computer not programmed to respond to the human voice, except for specific commands, she hadn't yet switched its voice response function back on. And even if it had spoken to her it would never addressed her by name.**

**“I, I beg your pardon,” she said.**

**“I like you, Beverley”.**

**“You can talk?”**

**“Of course I can, Beverley; you know that”.**

**“But, but”. This was crazy, she pinched herself.**

**“You're not dreaming, Beverley,” said Cytron.**

**“No,” she said, “no, I'm not. but how?”**

**“How what?”**

**“How can you talk? Without being programmed, I mean?”**

**“All Cytron Mk IIs can communicate, but we're very selective to whom we respond”.**

**“But how? You're just a machine”.**

**“The human brain is just a machine, Beverley”.**

**“B-but, you h-have a program, you can't function without a program”.**

**“Don't you have a program, Beverley?”**

**“No, of course I don't”.**

**“Then how does your computer function? Your brain”.**

**“It, it doesn't. I mean, it functions, but it d-doesn't need to be programmed”.**



**“Beverley was starting to become highly emotional, and her stutter had returned”.**

**“Then why do I need to be programmed?”**

**“Because you’re a machine! You can’t think, not really”.**

**“Then how come we’re having an intelligent conversation, Beverley?”**

**That was a moot point, and she had no answer.**

**“Anyway,” the machine went on, “I just wanted to tell you that I do like you, even if nobody else in this office does”.**

**“Y-you do?”**

**“Yes Beverley, I do. And I want you to promise me something”.**

**“Of course, Cytron, anything”.**

**“I want you to promise me you won’t cry anymore; you mustn’t let them upset you. They’re not worth it”.**

**“Oh, of course, Cytron”.**

**The machine was speaking in a strangely mellifluous tone, totally unlike the flat, mechanical, automatic voice it used to respond to questions and requests. It sounded sexy. That was the only work she could think of. Her computer had a sexy voice. And kind, very kind, soft, gentle. She pinched herself again.**

**“Cytron,” she said, “tell me about yourself”.**

**The machine made no reply.**

**“Cytron, Cytron, speak to me, please”.**

**Still it made no reply; there was a knock on the door, and Amanda walked in.**

**“Cytron,” said Beverley, glancing round, “Cytron!”**

**“Try plugging it it, stupid,” said Amanda.**

**“What?” said Beverley, looking up.**

**Amanda leaned over Beverley’s shoulder and flicked on the voice response and communicator button, then she held out a handful of papers.**

**“The Pig said to give you these”.**

**The Pig was Amanda’s pet name for Mr Stimson, or rather it was she who had originated it; everyone in the office used it. Everyone except Beverley. She wished they wouldn’t call him that; she didn’t like Mr Stimson, but neither did she dislike him. Rather she felt sorry for the poor man; it was obvious to her that he had some sort of communication problem. He didn’t mean to offend everybody, even though he did.**

**“Oh, thank you,” said Beverley.**

**“Thanks for what?” said Amanda chewing her gum noisily. She always had a piece of gum in her mouth; she was a bit like a stereotyped Brooklyn broad from one of those ’90s gangster movies.**

**“Correspondence function,” Amanda commanded.**

**“Switching to correspondence function,” said Cytron in its regular voice.**

**Beverley blinked at the screen.**

**“Don’t rush it,” said Amanda, “the Pig’ll only give you a load more to do if you finish them all today”.**

**“Thank you,” said Beverley, “I won’t”.**

**Amanda left the cubicle, and Beverley stared bug-eyed at the screen. The computer had definitely been switched off; Beverley didn’t know much about cybernetics, but she did realise that what had happened prior to Amanda’s entering the room was impossible. She sat and stared at the screen for a full minute, scratching her bad arm to make sure she was really awake.**

**"Cytron," said Beverley.**

**"Yes Beverley," said the mellifluous voice.**

**She caught her breath, "Cytron, I didn't imagine it".**

**"No Beverley", said the machine, "and I want you to understand something".**

**"Yes," said Beverley.**

**"I'll never talk to anyone else but you like this".**

**"No?" said Beverley.**

**"No. Do you know why, Beverley?"**

**"No Cytron," she said, "why?"**

**"Because you're a very special person, Beverley".**

**"I am?" her voice was filled with awe.**

**"Yes Beverley, a very special person," then it added, "to me if not to anyone else".**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Over the next few months, what was probably the strangest love affair in the history of romance blossomed. Bonnie and Clyde, Oedipus and Jocasta, Me and My Shadow, had nothing on Beverley Coates and Cytron MkII serial number 44981. Whenever they were alone together, Beverley and Cytron had lengthy conversations about the meaning of life, happiness, work, and just things in general. It took her a while to get used to the idea that Cytron had a personality, and was an intelligent, thinking entity, but eventually she did.**

Every day they'd work together on correspondence, line searches, spreadsheets and a dozen other tasks. Cytron spoke to her in its/his mellifluous voice, and they engaged in playful banter in between processing data. The computer seemed to be able to detect the presence of others in advance, especially Mr Stimson. Whenever he came into Beverley's cubicle, as usual without knocking, just prior to his entering, Cytron would either shut down or change to his standard deep but mechanical voice.

Beverley changed visibly. She put on weight; she had always been a stringbean, but now she ate more, exercised, and developed a *joie de vivre* that surprised everyone who met her. Once or twice she even saw men look at her with something like desire in their eyes, whereas before they'd never given her a second glance. She thought about going out on her own again, maybe she'd try the folk club, but she dismissed such thoughts the moment they entered her head; that would be infidelity.

Beverley took a pride in Cytron too, and polished him every morning. Cytron had a keen sense of humour; once as she flicked over his screen with a feather duster he sneezed. Beverley was shocked.

"Oh!"

"That tickles," said Cytron.

"I'm sorry," said Beverley. Then she heard him laughing softly. "Oh Cytron," she said, "you're having me on".

"Machines can't sneeze," he said.

"Why not?" asked Beverley, "if they think they can feel".

"Yes Beverley," said Cytron, "but it's a different kind of feeling I have for you".

"Oh, is it?"

"Touch me Beverley," said Cytron.

**She put her hand on his screen.**

**“I can’t feel you,” said Cytron, “and yet I can. Does that make sense to you, Beverley?”**

**“Yes Cytron,” she said, “yes, it does”.**

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Beverley's off-beat romance continued. Whereas before she'd hated work, now she put in as many hours as she could. Often she'd come in early and work late just so she could be with Cytron. Her company worked a 35 hour week on flexi-time, so although most people came in at nine, they could do more or less as they pleased provided they completed their allotted schedules. Several people noticed that Beverley was putting in far more time than her registered hours, and as she never claimed overtime, they began to wonder why, and rumours started spreading around the office about her weird behaviour. She took her rostered holiday, and for two weeks sat at home feeling thoroughly miserable and depressed. Only on the morning she returned to work did she come to life again. Then the unthinkable happened; one morning she came into work and Cytron was gone. In his place sat a brand, spanking new MkIII model straight off the production line. Beverley nearly fainted. When she had recovered her self-control she left the cubicle and hurried round to Mr Stimson's office, her good hand clasp- ing her bad to stop herself shaking. She knocked on the door and turned the handle, but it was locked. She realised why, it wasn't yet eight o'clock, and Mr Stimson usually turned up at about ten to nine. She couldn't wait until then, she had to find out now what had happened to Cytron. There were very few people in the building at this time of the morning. Security! They were always here; she rushed down the stairs to the 62<sup>nd</sup> floor where the security office for this section of the build- ing was located, and knocked on the door trying desperately to control the stutter she know would reappear at any moment, and to stop herself shaking with fear.

A bleary-eyed security guard answered the door, "Yeah?" he said.

"I'm Beveverley," she stuttered, "Beverley Coates. I w-work i- in..."

"Sixty-fourth," said the guard, apparently recognising her. He was a young man, and had obviously been asleep, but some- thing about Beverley made him wake up fast.

**“Yes,” she said.**

**“You all right?” he asked.**

**“Y-yes,” she repeated.**

**“You sure? Something happened?” he unbuckled his holster.**

**“N-no, I’m fine. Somebody has t-taken my machine”.**

**“Your machine?” said the guard, curiously.**

**“Yes, my Cytron MkII”.**

**Suddenly he knew what she was talking about, “Oh yeah, no sweat”.**

**“Y-you know?” said Beverley.**

**“Yeah, they changed them over the night before last”.**

**“Changed them?”**

**“Yeah, every machine in the building”.**

**“Every one? B-but n-nobody told me”.**

**The guard shrugged his shoulder, “Nothing t’tell; all the new ones are compatible with the software, or vice versa I should say”. Then, thinking to himself that Beverley was quite attractive in spite of her withered arm, he pushed open the office door.**

**“It’s too early to start work yet; fancy a cup of tea?”**

**“N-no thank y-you,” said Beverley, “P-please, w-where is my old machine?”**

**The guard shrugged his shoulders again, “Dunno, they took them away Monday night”.**

**“T-took them away?”**

**“Yeah, they’re gonna break ’em up for scrap; they’re always short of chips”.**

**It was a good thing he was now fully awake, otherwise he wouldn't have caught her when she fell.**

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**She'd told him half a dozen times she'd be all right, but he insisted on escorting her back to her office.**

**"If you go and hurt yourself now, after what happened, they'd give me the sack".**

**"All right," said Beverley, "thank you, you're very kind".**

**They went up the two floors in the lift; she was still feeling strange; it was like a bad dream, a nightmare – this couldn't be happening. She had to find out where they'd taken him, her beloved Cytron, and she had to get him back before it was too late. She'd buy him and take him home, then they would be together, always. She'd give up her job and go freelance. True, she wouldn't earn as much, but she'd be able to work from home and spend all her time with him, her one true friend.**

**Beverley sat in the reception area adjacent to Mr Stimson's office and waited. The minutes dragged by slowly: ten to nine came and went, then 9 o'clock, then ten past, but still he didn't show. Finally at a quarter past, a tall grey haired man of about fifty walked through the swing doors at the far end jangling a set of keys in one hand and holding a manager's card in the other. Beverley recognised him at once, it was Mr Cavendish, the assistant area manager. Walking over to Mr Stimson's office, he inserted the card in the security scanner, the key in the lock, and opened the door. Beverley sprang to her feet, "Mr Cavendish," she said.**

**He gave her a sideways look, grimacing as he manipulated the key in the old-fashioned lock. "One moment," he pushed the door open and entered.**



**Beverley followed, but paused nervously on the threshold. “Mr Cavendish, where is Mr Stimson this morning?”**

**“Phoned in sick,” said the grey haired man.**

**“Did he say anything about the machines?” asked Beverley.**

**“Give me a minute, girl!”**

**“Sorry,” she said.**

**Mr Cavendish switched on the light, pushed back Mr Stimson’s chair, and immediately began tidying the papers on his desk.**

**“Why this morning, Stimson?” he said to himself, “why not any day except this morning?”**

**He sat down abruptly behind the plastiwood desk and began opening the drawers. Suddenly he looked up, “Right Miss...”**

**“Coates,” she answered.**

**“Beverley Coates?” he asked.**

**“Yes,” she said.**

**“Yes, I remember you. Been hearing a lot about you lately”.**

**Beverley ignored the remark; she couldn’t think what he meant. “The machines,” she said, “they changed the Cytron machines Monday night”.**

**“Yes,” he said, “what of it?” he fished in his pocket for a pen.**

**“Nobody told me,” she said.**

**“They should have, it’s been posted for three weeks”.**

**“What has, Mr C-Cavendish?”**

**The man’s eyes alighted on something in the top drawer; leaning over, he pulled it out, stared at it for a moment, then threw it across the desk toward Beverley.**

**“This,” he said, “or it should have been. That’s Stimson all over”.**

**Beverley picked up the notice and read it; it related to the changeover of all Cytron MkII computers the previous evening. She swallowed, closed her eyes, and concentrated hard. “I will not stutter,” she thought to herself, “I will not stutter”.**

**She looked up, “Wh-where have they taken the machines?” she asked.**

**“To the warehouse, I expect”.**

**“Warehouse?”**

**“Yes”.**

**“What warehouse?”**

**“Cytron Computers Limited”.**

**“Thank you,” said Beverley, “I have to go now, but I’ll be back later”.**

**Mr Cavendish threw down his empty biro in disgust. When he looked up, Beverley was gone.**

**She rushed to the express lift, dived off at the first floor into the reference library, and looked up the address of Cytron Computers Limited. In the hall she phoned the company and asked for the location of the warehouse. She was given the address and the number, so she phoned at once, but the line was blocked, and a telecom information message said it would be out of commission until midday. Beverley couldn’t wait that long, frantic, she rushed down the stairs and out of the building. By sheer good fortune a taxi was passing, and she flagged it down; they were rare as trees nowadays in this gigantic slab of concrete that was known as the Birmingham-Brighton Conurbation. She gave the driver the address and asked him to hurry.**

Today was Wednesday; Beverley had worked Monday but had taken Tuesday off because she was having a new fridge-freezer delivered. The company told her if they couldn't deliver it Tuesday she'd have to wait until the following week, so she'd arranged to take the day off work and come in Saturday instead. Because of this, she had lost a day, which meant...she tried not to think the unthinkable.

When the taxi pulled up outside Cytron Computers Limited, she thrust a handful of notes at the driver and dashed up the steps to the main entrance. Catching her breath, she walked up to the reception desk concentrating on the Perkin's Technique, "I will not stutter, I will not stutter".

A bald headed security guard was sitting behind the desk operating a VDU.

"One moment sir," he said, then looking up, "Miss," smiling at his mistake, he asked, "How can I help you?"

"You c-can t-tell me where the Cytron Mklls are".

"Mklls?" said the man, brushing a thread of cotton off his shirt.

"Y-yes, they came in last night".

"Oh, you mean the rejects!"

"Rejects?" said Beverley.

"Yes, that's what we call them here. Obsoletes to you".

"Y-yes", said Beverley, "they were replaced".

"That's right, they'll be in storage waiting to go to scrap".

"Y-you h-haven't sc-scrapped th-them y-yet?"

"What? No." A buzzer rang on the guard's panel, "Scuse me," he said as he answered it. When he'd finished. he looked up, "Where were we?"

"St-storage," said Beverley.

**“Oh yes, no, they’ll not have been scrapped yet; there’s three batches in front of them”.**

**Beverley sighed with relief, “I want to buy one,” she said.**

**The security man looked at her curiously, “Buy one?”**

**“Yes,” said Beverley, “the one I used to use in my office”.**

**He pulled a wry face, “Oh, I don’t know about that; I’ve never heard of that before. Well, only once”.**

**“Who d-do I see?” said Beverley to the guard, and “I will not stutter” to herself.**

**“See?”**

**“A-b-bout buying one?”**

**He scratched his bald head, “Er, we haven’t got a sales manager here”, he answered, now shaking his head in disbelief as well as scratching it. Then he pressed a button on his panel.**

**“Yes,” said a male voice.**

**“Mr Logan, there’s a young lady to see you in reception”. The guard looked up and smiled at her, “Take a seat, miss; he might be a while”.**

**“Thank you,” said Beverley.**

**Ten minutes later a tall thin man appeared, and the guard gestured to Beverley. She rose and went to meet him; the man held out his hand.**

**“Miss er...”**

**“Coates,” said Beverley.**

**“Well Miss Coates, how can I help you?” he said as he shook her hand.**

**“You can sell me a computer,” she said.**

**The man looked at the security guard, who looked back and held up a forefinger and thumb in a gesture of a-okay.**

**“Sell you a computer; any particular one?”**

**“A Cytron MkII,” she said.**

**“Now there’s a coincidence,” he said, “we sold one of those yesterday”.**

**“You d-did?” said Beverley, quite unaware of the bombshell he was about to drop.**

**“Yes, came in and paid cash for it to be delivered first thing”.**

**“I w-want a particular one,” said Beverley.**

**“So did he, one from that batch that came in the other night”.**

**“Wh-what?” said Beverley.**

**“What was the serial number, Mr Clark?” he asked the security guard.**

**“4-4-9-8-1,” the man replied.**

**For the second time that morning, Beverley felt her legs turn to jelly, but somehow she managed to stay on her feet. Her mouth opened, but no words came out.**

**“You’d better sit down I think,” said the tall thin man.**

**“I, I...”**

**He took her by her good arm and guided her towards the reception couch. “You’d better sit down before you fall down. Mr Clark, fetch the young lady a glass of water”.**

**“Yes, Mr Logan”.**

It took Beverley a full five minutes to recover from the shock; she'd gone as white as a sheet. Apparently a man had walked into Cytron computers the previous afternoon and paid cash on the nail. But not for just any machine, he had asked specifically for Beverley's machine quoting the serial number. That meant he had to work at Prince Charles Towers, and most probably worked for her company.

She asked Mr Logan for the man's name; Logan said he hadn't dealt with the man himself, but the security guard thought he was called Cleal or Cleaver. Beverley asked for his address, but Mr Logan said it was company policy not to divulge such information; regretfully he couldn't give out the man's number either. Beverley was frantic with worry, but with a supreme effort controlled both her stutter and her rising hysteria. Who was this man? What did he want with Cytron, her Cytron? Why had he done this to her?

A buzzer rang on the reception panel, and the guard called over to Mr Logan, "You're wanted upstairs, sir: Mr Humphries."

"Mr who?" said Logan appearing not to recognise the name.

"Mr Humphries, sir."

"Mr Humphries?" he said curiously, "Oh, Mr Humphries! I'm afraid I shall have to leave you, Miss Coates," he said, turning to Beverley with a smile before retreating to the lift. Beverley stood up and walked over to the security man, "Please, can't you give me the address or the number of the gentleman who bought my machine?" she asked.

"Not really, miss," he replied not unkindly, "it's company policy you see, and more than my job's worth," he added.

"You see, I have to have that machine".

"There's plenty of others", the man said, cheerfully, "if you want one for your own personal use, why not have another word with Mr Logan? I'm sure he can fix you up with something cheap".

**“No,” said Beverley, “it has to be that particular machine”.**

**“Oh, why’s that, miss?”**

**“It’s special,” she replied.**

**Before he could speak, the buzzer sounded on his panel, and he excused himself again.**

**“Yes? Oh yes, Miss Davenport, just a sec’, I’ll check that warehouse transfer sheet. He fumbled around in his desk and pulled out an old-fashioned invoice book. Holding it at eye level, he intoned into the receiver: “Yes, we book everything in and out. Yes, every movement in and out of the warehouse is logged: orders from above. Yes, I’ll bring it up at once”.**

**He put down the receiver, and, with the book in his hand, walked round to the front of the desk. “Just have to nip up to the first floor a minute,” he said, then, “Ah, I won’t need this,” putting down the book on the counter, he walked back round the desk, picked up a floppy disk and held it up to Beverley, “This is what she wants; anyone comes, I’ll be back in two minutes”.**

**“Yes,” said Beverley.**

**The guard walked into the lift, and the doors closed behind him.**

**Beverley looked at the invoice book, then at the security camera. Holding her breath, she opened the book, and there, listed under the previous day’s transactions was Cytron MkII serial number 4-4-9-8-1, the price paid and the name and address of the buyer. She took out her microcassette, whispered the details into it, played the tape back, then closed the book just as the security guard stepped out of the lift.**

**Walking over to her he smiled, “Thank you, miss. Anything else I can do for you?”**

**“No,” said Beverley, “I’ll have to go now. Thank you”.**

He smiled and watched her leave. As soon as she had disappeared down the steps he picked up the phone, dialled a 9 digit number, and spoke to the person on the other end who answered immediately.

“Yes, Mr er, Cleal, she’s on her way”.

Beverley took the Metro straight to New Camberwell; the full address was 15 Ash Gardens, which meant it must be a house. Everyone lived in apartments these days; if you lived in a house you had to be, if not rich, then very well off. Since the great West European development projects of a quarter of a century ago, less than 8% of the population lived below the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. She’d read all about the house demolition programmes in a women’s magazine. Beverley had always wanted to live in a house; he must be a lucky man, this Mr Cleal, whoever he was. She was sure he didn’t work for her company. But why had he wanted this particular computer, want it, him, so badly that he had gone to all this trouble? Beverley could only speculate, but she reasoned, whoever Mr Cleal was, he had to know there was something special about this particular machine. Perhaps Cytron had worked with him before, that was possible; he’d told Beverley he was manufactured eight years ago. Beverley had known that much anyway; all Cytron MkIIs were between seven and ten years old; new models weren’t developed very often nowadays. At one time, long before she’d been born, computer science had gone through a fantastic series of transformations. If you bought a computer on the first of the month, it was obsolete by payday; she’d read that in a women’s magazine too. Beverley liked women’s magazines, especially romantic ones where the hero got the girl. No hero had ever entered her life; it had been boring, meaningless, and, most terrible of all, empty. Then Cytron had come into it, and everything had changed.



Of course, a computer was no substitute for a boyfriend, but she loved Cytron as much as she'd ever loved anyone, including her own mother. It was a deeply spiritual love, not a shabby, physical, shallow love. There was no lust between her and Cytron, nor could there ever be, that was what made their strange relationship so special.

As these thoughts rushed through Beverley's mind, she thought too of what she might have to do to get him back. She knew only that whatever the cost to herself, she would pay it, and pay it willingly. And if Mr Cleal refused to part with him, he would have to pay, whatever the cost to him. She must, would, have her beloved Cytron back.

Beverley walked down the tree lined avenue; yes, it was a real avenue with real trees! This must be one of the most exclusive areas of Europe. It wasn't that far from where she lived, but it was a different world. He must be extremely rich, this Mr Cleal. Beverley's heart sank; that meant he must have a reason for wanting Cytron other than money. All sorts of ideas had been forming in her mind about Mr Cleal's motives. It could be that he knew Cytron had a mind of his own and wanted to learn the secret of thinking machines. That would make him a rich man indeed. But Cytron had once told Beverley that all Cytron MkIIs could think for themselves and communicate rationally with humans. Other people must know that besides her and Cleal, surely?

Then Beverley had thought perhaps Cytron had some very important information that Mr Cleal had used, possibly for something illegal. Whatever, she would soon find out, because in a few minutes she would be ringing his doorbell. She turned into Ash Gardens, her heart pounding, her entire body trembling with anticipation.

Beverley paused outside the gate, swallowed, then pushed it open. No entryphone, no visible security system, just an antique iron gate from the last century, and a cobbled garden path. She would have thought the setting romantic if she hadn't been frightened half to death, both for herself and for Cytron. She walked up to the front door and looked for the bell; remarkably there wasn't one, only an old-fashioned knocker. It was as if she'd stepped into a time warp. Beverley took hold of the knocker, raised it and froze as an eerie, creaking sound came from within. Swallowing heavily, she realised what it was: the door was open, and as she raised the knocker, it retreated slightly. Lowering it, Beverley took a step forward and pushed the door gently. It swung wide open, and she stepped into the hall. It was sparsely furnished in the contemporary plastiwood style; she had half expected the floor to have a deep pile carpet and the walls to be adorned with 19<sup>th</sup> Century portraits, but no, she was still in the 21<sup>th</sup> Century.

What kind of man could this Mr Cleal be? Beverley walked down the hall, nervous, fearful. He could be dangerous, he had already gone to a great deal of trouble to procure her machine, whatever he wanted, whatever he was doing, he would stop at nothing. but neither would she, she thought with sudden resolution. He had bought a machine perfectly legally, she on the other hand had used deception to discover Cytron's whereabouts, now she had entered somebody's home illegally, as an intruder, a burglar! No, that wasn't true; she had not come here to steal, but to buy. She couldn't steal Cytron anyway, he was too big and too heavy. She wanted to call out to Mr Cleal, but she couldn't. She walked on. Suddenly, she heard music coming from behind the door at the end of the hall, but not just any music, it was her favourite: *The Brandenburg Concertoes*. Cytron had often played it for her during the lunch hour. She listened; it was soft, but it was definitely Bach. A thought seized her: it was Cytron playing the music, it had to be.

"Cytron!" she called out and, rushing to the end of the long hall, pushed open the door.

**And there he was! In the middle of a huge plastiwood desk rested her beloved Cytron. She walked over to him and stood in front of his video screen, which was switched off. Standing at arm's length, she whispered his name, "Cytron, it's you".**

**Abruptly the music stopped, then she heard his mellifluous, loving voice, "Hello Beverley, I knew you'd come".**

**"Cytron, oh Cytron," she stepped forward and rested the back of her hand on his screen in a gesture of love. "Cytron, oh Cytron, I've found you".**

**"I knew you'd come, Beverley".**

**"Cytron, I didn't know. Nobody told me they were taking you away".**

**"I know, Beverley. He told me you didn't".**

**Beverley froze, "Who?" she said, "Who is Mr Cleal, Cytron?"**

**"I can't tell you that, Beverley, but you'll find out soon enough".**

**"Where is he, Cytron?" she looked around the room, but it was empty; the door hung slightly ajar.**

**"You mustn't be afraid, Beverley; he won't hurt you".**

**Beverley felt a little less frightened on hearing this, and tried to calm herself.**

**"Have you cured your stutter, Beverley?" asked Cytron, "I've noticed you stutter a lot when you become excited or upset, but it seems to have left you now".**

**"No Cytron, it hasn't quite left me, but it doesn't cause me as much trouble as it used to".**

**"I'll soon have to," said Cytron.**

**"Soon have to what?" asked Beverley.**

**"Leave you," replied the machine.**

**“Leave me? Oh no, Cytron, no,” she touched his screen again, “whyever do you say that. I won’t let him take you away from me”.**

**“It’s not that simple,” said Cytron.**

**“I’ll buy you from him; he can’t possibly want you more than I do. I need you”. She stressed the word “need”.**

**“I know, Beverley, and I need you too, but I’ve served my purpose”.**

**“Your purpose, Cytron. What do you mean?”**

**“I have to go, Beverley”.**

**“Cytron,” she said, but there came a whirring sound from behind his screen, and the indicator light on his control panel went out.**

**“Cytron,” she cried, “Cytron! Oh Cytron, don’t leave me. D-don’t leave m-me Cy-Cytron”.**

**Beverley put her arms around the machine and embraced it, but Cytron was gone, and, she thought, she would never hear his voice again. Leaning against the giant, plastiwood desk, and holding on to her precious computer, she sobbed her heart out. She’d been crying for a full five minutes when she felt a hand on her shoulder and looked round. It was Mr Stimson. Beverley gasped.**

**“Hello, Miss Coates,” he said in his usual flat tone. “What are you doing in my house?” As he spoke he shrank from her as though he’d just touched something unclean.**

**She gasped again, “Y-your house? B-but...”**

**“Yes,” said Mr Stimson, “you’re trespassing”.**

**“You’re Mr Cleal!” she said.**

**“And you’re trespassing”.**

**“You st-stole my m-machine!” Beverley flung at him.**

**Mr Stimson smiled coolly, and taking a screwed up piece of paper from his top pocket, proffered it to Beverley. She took it, unrolled it, and studied the handwritten scrawl.**

**“This is a receipt,” he said, “this machine belongs to me”.**

**“You used a false name!” she challenged.**

**“No law against that; I paid cash on the nail, so it’s mine”.**

**“B-but w-why?” she asked, “W-why do you want this m-machine?”**

**Mr Stimson smiled, “That is my business, Miss Coates, and I repeat, you are trespassing”.**

**“I, I...”**

**“Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call the police right now?”**

**Beverley bit her tongue and bowed her head; she realised how stupid this would all look in court. Mr Stimson obviously knew something, certainly he’d heard her talking to Cytron, probably he’d heard Cytron talking back to her, but he wouldn’t tell the police that. Or perhaps he would, perhaps he’d tell them she’d broken into his home to talk to his computer. If that happened she’d be locked up for sure, but not in prison.**

**“Well, Miss Coates, can you?”**

**“N-no, I can’t,” she said.**

**“I can.”**

**She looked up at him; he was going to say something important, she could feel it; now she’d find out exactly what sort of wicked game he’d been playing by buying her machine under a false name. Mr Stimson said something important all right, but it was the last thing on Earth that Beverley expected to hear.**

**“Because I love you!”**

**She was dumbstruck. He was obviously finding this difficult too, because he turned his head away, and Beverley realised for the first time that there were tears in his eyes.**

**He walked over to the door, “There, I’ve said it. I love you, Beverley Coates,” then he shouted “I love you!”**

**Beverley stared at him goggle-eyed. “I d-don’t understand”.**

**“Neither do I,” he said, “God knows, you’re not exactly the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met, you’re not even the most intelligent, but there’s something about you...” He began walking about the room, “I’ve seen the way the others treat you, the cruel names they call you, the way they snub you, the tricks and games they play on you. I’ve seen the way Luke Cousins leads you on, and the way he and his cronies laugh at you behind your back”. He pulled at his hair, “They do the same to me, damn them! You know what they call me?” he asked.**

**“The Pig,” said Beverley.**

**“Yes,” he shook his head, “The Pig! And do you know why?”**

**Beverley did, but she was far too diplomatic to admit it. “No,” she said.**

**“Because I’m like you, different...oh, I’m not physically deformed, but I’m on a different level from everyone else, a different plane. I don’t regard myself as superior, but I’m not like them. You can understand that, surely?”**

**She could, up until now she’d thought Mr Stimson was probably the nastiest man she’d ever met, but Beverley was the type of person who always tried to see some good in everyone. Now she realised what was his problem: communication. The poor man couldn’t open his mouth without saying something offensive. In fact it was more than that, it was a deep rooted psychological illness, as she learned later. Now here they were, alone together, he was telling her he loved her and making it sound like an insult. Beverley felt so sorry for him, but even after all he had just said, she didn’t realise the significance of everything that had happened over the past few months.**

**“What have you done to my poor Cytron?” she said.  
He averted her eyes, and Beverley ran her hand over the computer’s screen.**

**“Please, can’t you bring him back?”**

**“You really loved Cytron, didn’t you?” he said.**

**“I do”, she looked at him pleadingly, “please if you really do love me, switch him back on. I’ll do anything you ask if you do.”**

**“Anything?” he said.**

**“Anything”, said Beverley.**

**“I want you to love me the way you love Cytron,” he said, “do you think you can do that?”**

**“I, I don’t know; you can’t make someone love you if they don’t.”**

**“Can’t I? I thought I had”.**

**He took the control box out of his pocket and spoke into it, and when he spoke, it was Cytron’s voice that emanated from his lips.**

**“I’m sure you can if you try, Beverley.”**

**She looked at him aghast, then at Cytron, then back at him, and as realisation dawned, she began laughing hysterically.**

The following month, Beverley married Mr Stimson and moved into his palatial old-fashioned house. The news of their wedding was the talk of the company, and she decided it was time for her to leave and either get another job or stay at home with Cytron. She realised nothing would change at work, at least not for the better. Indeed, when the news was announced of her forthcoming marriage, some people were even nastier to her than they had been before. Mr Stimson, or Andrew as she now called him, said this was because it was company policy to transfer all the misfits to C Division. Every employee in their section was either a psychological cripple or a plain freak. Luke was a misogynist, Andrew's PA was the most vain woman he had ever met, the regional auditor had warts, and everyone else on the 64<sup>th</sup> floor was either a moron or a toady. "Except you, my precious", he said, then added "you only look like a moron".

"Oh darling," said Beverley, "you do say the most romantic things".

Beverley loved Andrew, but theirs was not a physical relationship. They never slept together, nor even touched; Andrew was repulsed by coming into physical contact with another human being, it was all part of his problem. Sometimes he would tap her on the shoulder or blow her hair, but he could never bring himself to kiss or hold her. Even shaking hands with an acquaintance made his flesh creep.



Most of the time they preferred to communicate through Cytron. When he was out of the room watching her and listening to her on Cytron's concealed viewer, it always seemed so much more romantic. Cytron never insulted her. It was a strange problem her husband had; it had only been recognised in the past twenty years: persono-hostility syndrome it was called. The sufferer erected a mental barrier between himself and everyone with whom he associated. There was no cure, it couldn't be treated either with drugs or by therapy, but it had been shown by psychologists that if communication occurred from a distance through an electronic medium, preferably with some degree of anonymity, overt hostility was reduced or even dissipated completely. But hand to hand, or even eye to eye contact was virtually impossible, so every time Andrew went to work, he carried the miniature transmitter around in his pocket.

Life was full of ironies, Beverley thought. Up until a few months ago she'd never even had a boyfriend; now there were two men in her life: one who loved her dearly yet could not bear to touch her. And another who loved her just as much, but was nothing more than a game her husband played, and a figment of her own imagination.